

Salvation in the Old Testament

How were people saved before the coming of Christ? Are there two ways of salvation, one through the Old Testament law and sacrificial system and another by grace through faith in Christ?

The basis of salvation:

The basis of salvation in all generations is the death of Christ. According to Leviticus 17:11; “. . . it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” That is, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:22). But not just any blood will do. Hebrews 10:4 clearly states that the blood of animals cannot take away sins. Moreover, there is no indication in scripture that human blood would atone for sin either. Only the blood of Christ can atone for sin fully (Matt. 26:28; Ro. 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; etc.). Since God demands the shedding of blood for removing sin, and no human or animal blood can completely remove it, the only basis upon which God can offer salvation at any time in history must be the sacrifice of Christ.

This, of course, does not mean that Christ died before history began. Nor does it mean that throughout history men have had a clear understanding about the death of Christ. When we say that the death of Christ is the only basis for salvation we mean that God determined that Christ must die before He actually did. Since God knows and controls all things, from His perspective Christ's death was “history” even before happened. Whatever God foreordains to happen, happens.

To avoid confusion it is important to keep man's and God's perspectives separate. Just because God knows what will happen before it does, doesn't mean that man shares that same knowledge. Man's knowledge of salvation grew as God progressively revealed more about it over time. Therefore, we should not assume that Abraham, for example, had the same clarity of understanding about salvation as we do.

In other words, the basis of salvation has always been the same. It has always been the death of Christ. But knowledge of salvation hasn't been

the same in every generation. As history progressed and revelation increased God's plan of salvation became clearer and clearer.

The requirement of salvation:

In every generation grace is necessary for salvation. The Bible is very clear that regardless of when someone lives he is incapable of doing anything pleasing to God apart from God's help. Not only is it useless to try to be saved by doing good works, even if it was possible to keep the whole law, that alone wouldn't save anyone (Ro. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11).

In every generation the person who committed himself in faith to God and all that He revealed about His salvation up to that time, was saved (Ro. 4:5). Abraham was justified by faith (Ro. 4:9-13) as were all the other Old Testament believers. Hebrews 11 makes it clear that each man acted in faith because he believed in God. It is also interesting to note that the prophets don't call Israel to return to the sacrificial system or belief in God's promises. Instead they tell men to forsake sin and return to God (Jer. 3:1, 12, 14, 22; 4:1; Hos. 12:6; 14:1; Joel 2:12). The same is true today. When we ask men to believe in Christ we are asking them to turn to God and His provision of salvation in His Son.

Therefore, the requirement of salvation is the same in every generation. God always requires that man respond in faith to whatever He reveals concerning salvation. The ability to believe and the provision to be saved are both acts of grace.

The content of salvation:

The object of faith in every age has always been God. The issue at any time in history is if man will take God at His Word and believe what He has revealed about salvation.

The basis of salvation and the requirement of salvation have remained the same in every age. However, the amount of information about salvation differs from age to age. In every age salvation was directly tied to the faith one had in what God had revealed up to that point of time.

For example, if we lived in the days of Moses our knowledge of Christ would be very limited and we would be required to offer animal sacrifices. However, it wasn't faith in the sacrificial system that saved us, it was faith in God who said if we offered sacrifices in the prescribed manner He would cleanse us from sin. Our salvation was directly tied to the faith we had in what God had revealed up to that point of time.

Because God revealed more and more about salvation over time, the content of what was necessary to believe also grew correspondingly. For example, the believer who lived in the time of Moses also accepted God as He revealed Himself to Abraham years earlier. But, the believer living in the time of Abraham was not able to respond to the law of Moses for it was not yet revealed. In the same way, when someone commits themselves to Christ they also are believing in the God of the Old Testament, the God of Abraham and Moses, for there is only one God.

Thus the specific content of what someone believed changed in various times of history. Though the death of Christ provided the actual power for salvation, it wasn't until He came that the fullness of salvation was revealed. Up until that time neither God's revelation, nor His acts in history revealed the complete picture of salvation.

The way a believer expressed his salvation:

Just as the content of what someone believed changed as revelation increased over time, the way the believer responded to what he believed also changed. This shouldn't be confused with what was required to be saved. The object of faith was always God. What was required to be saved was belief in what God revealed about salvation. *The expression of salvation is the way a believer is to respond to God on the basis of what was revealed to him.*

Some expressions of faith have remained constant in every generation while other things have changed. For example, God's moral law has never changed. It was, is, and always will be wrong to murder someone. A believer in every age reflects his belief in God by adhering to God's moral law. But some expressions of faith have changed. At the time of Moses a believer expressed his faith by bringing animal sacrifices. Today animal sacrifices are

no longer needed, yet we express our faith in ways that the Jews didn't, like through baptism and communion.

The function of Old Testament sacrifices in relation to salvation:

The Old Testament is very clear that sin was covered, cleansed, and forgiven by means of offering sacrifices.

Sacrifices had four basic functions.

1) Sacrifices served a function in relationship to society.

Under the Old Testament system a Jew was related to God by means of physical birth as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was born into both a society and a religious system. Although Israel had kings, God was always the ultimate Ruler. Consequently, when someone sinned, he did so against both his Savior (God), his King (God), and his country. The purpose of sacrifice, therefore, had a twofold function; to restore one's relationship to God, and to restore harmony in the community over which God ruled.

However, bringing sacrifices did not necessarily imply the person was saved, for if it was brought without repentance, it served only in a civil capacity.

2) Sacrifices looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice offered by Christ

Hebrews 10:1 indicates that the entire law and sacrificial system foreshadowed what was to come. This is not saying that everyone who offered sacrifices understood them in this way. It is unlikely that any Jew offered sacrifices thinking that it anticipated the death of Christ. Even so this was indeed what they were doing and as God revealed this to man the typological meaning of the sacrifice became evident.

3) Sacrifices also had a function in worship

Whenever a believer offered a sacrifice with a proper heart he was doing what God had asked of him and such service brought glory to God.

4) Sacrifices were related to salvation

Sacrifices are said to "atone" for sin. The word atone can mean "to cover" or "to pay a ransom." It was used of the money that a man could pay to escape the death penalty. For example, if a man owned a dangerous ox and it killed somebody, he was liable to the death penalty. But the court could decide to spare his life if a ransom price was paid (Ex. 21:30). In the case of adultery the aggrieved husband could have his wife and her lover put to death (Lev. 20:10). However, he might also choose to spare her and her bed-mate if compensation was paid (Prov. 6:35). In certain cases one could not buy his own life back. A murderer must pay for his sin with his own blood (Nu. 35:31, 33). Such ideas are compatible with most passages that speak of a sacrifice "making atonement." In these cases "to make atonement" was to literally pay a ransom for one's life. Where sin was not atoned for, deaths were liable to occur. There are many places in the Bible where sin resulted in instant judgment and death (Ex. 32:25-35; Lev. 10; Num. 25). In these passages there is no mention of offering a sacrifice. When men died there was no need for sacrifice as well for the penalty was already paid (Num. 25:6-13 cf. 16:36-50). However, if atonement through sacrifice was made, the penalty (death) was avoided (Wenham, Leviticus, 25-28; 59-60). There are also instances when the life of someone atoned for the death of another. When Israel made the golden calf Moses offered himself for Israel's sin, asking that they be forgiven and he be blotted out. His prayer was rejected and God sent a plague among the nation (Ex. 32:30-32). Phinehas is said to have made atonement by killing Zimri and Cozbi (Nu. 25:13). David made atonement to the Gibeonites by delivering over seven descendants of Saul (II Sam. 21:3ff.).

Though God had promised to cleanse the person who brought a sacrifice for sin He clarified in Romans 3:20 that no one is justified (declared righteous) by simply outwardly doing the works of the law. The Old Testament believer wasn't to put his faith in the sacrifice per se, but in the promise of God regarding it. The sacrifice didn't save anyone, but in

accepting the God of Israel, sacrifices became the natural expression, or outworking, of faith in God.

Thus it appears that bringing sacrifices for sin had to do more with cleansing the person from sin (sanctification) than salvation. For example, when Job offered his sacrifice (Job 42:7-9) he was already saved at the time. Of course it must be remembered that offering sacrifices with improper motives availed nothing (Ps. 40:6-10; 51:10, 16-17; Isa. 1:11-17; Micah 6:6-8).

Without doubt when someone offered a sacrifice for sin he received actual forgiveness (Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 16; 16:20-22). In fact, it was the only system available at that time to receive forgiveness. However, the forgiveness was only temporary, external, and legal in nature.

To a believer in the Old Testament time period, the issue was not between faith or sacrifices, it was both faith and sacrifices. Faith resulted in salvation, the sacrifices resulted in a cleansing of the individual (Heb. 9:13 - "the flesh") and were an expression of the faith that the person already possessed.

In the same way, we must confess our sins to continue to be cleansed and grow in our relationship with God (I Jn. 1:9) and unrepentant sin can still lead to death (I Cor. 11:29-32). The Old Testament believer also needed to confess, but in addition he brought a sacrifice. When Christ died, and the all sufficient sacrifice had been made, the repentant believer no longer needs to give another sacrifice in order to receive cleansing.

The comparison of the Old Testament sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ:

1) Old Testament sacrifices are superceded by the sacrifice of Christ (Gal. 3:24-25; the book of Hebrews).

2) Old Testament sacrifices covered sin and assured cleansing and forgiveness. However, the sacrifice of Christ actually removed the sin (Heb. 10:11-14) of all men (Heb. 2:9; 7:27; 10:10; Rom. 6:10; I Pet. 3:18) regardless of when they lived. If animal sacrifice accomplished complete removal of sin

there would be no need for the prophet Isaiah to speak of the fact that all our sin would be laid on Messiah (Isa. 53:6).

Atonement involved paying a ransom price for life. Old Testament sacrifices were like a down payment. The death of Christ paid the price in full. Once the payment has been made in full there is no longer a need to make down payments anymore.

3) The Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Heb. 10:1; Matt. 5:17).

4) The sacrifices offered in the Old Testament were limited in scope. Through sacrifice sin was forgiven, but the general rule was that the only sin forgiven was the one for which the sacrifice was offered. Though the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement covered more than just one sin, it did not cover sin for all time. Christ's sacrifice, by contrast, was once for all, never to be repeated, and all inclusive in nature (Heb. 7:27; 10:12, 14). Nothing can be added to the sacrifice of Christ since it provides all that is necessary for all sin.

Conclusion:

When we talk about salvation in the Old and New Testaments there are two distinctions that need to be maintained. There is the fact that someone must pay the price of salvation (the objective aspect of salvation). This had to happen sometime in history. Then once the price has been paid, the sinner must take hold of the salvation that is available (the subjective aspect of salvation). When Christ died, salvation was potentially made available to all men. In other words, Christ's death made it possible for men to be saved. However, just because salvation has been provided doesn't mean that anyone will be saved. God must also apply that salvation to us.

When we keep these distinctions clear in our minds it makes salvation in the Old Testament easier to understand. The death of Christ on the cross paid the price for sin. How much Old Testament believers understood this is unclear. They simply placed their faith in God and did what He told them to do - offer sacrifices to cover sin. God then accepted their faith and the sacrifice that their faith expressed as a down payment until the price was

paid in full by Christ. Salvation was by grace through faith in God and expressed in obedience to what He had commanded.

Salvation is the same today.

For more technical reading:

1. Walter Kaiser, Toward and Old Testament Theology, 114-118
2. John S. Feinberg, Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg; 39-78
3. John C. Whitcomb, Grace Theological Journal, 6:2 Fall 1985, 200-217
- 4, Leon Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 112-128

NOTES ON ROMANS 3:25-26

3:25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

3:26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The holiness of God responds to sin with wrath and judgment. "To the men of the OT the wrath of God is both very real and very serious. God is not thought of as capriciously angry (like the deities of the heathen), but, because He is a moral Being, His anger is directed toward wrongdoing in any shape or form. Once aroused His anger is not easily assuaged, and dire consequences may follow. But it is only fair to add that the OT consistently regards God as a God of mercy. Though men sin and thus draw down upon themselves the consequences of His wrath, yet God does not delight in the death of the sinner. He provides ways in which the consequences of sin may be averted" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 149; Morris has an excellent discussion about the wrath of God and its effects 149-154). In Romans 1 Paul showed that the judgment of God rests upon the pagan world. In chapter two he spoke of the judgment to come (2:2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 16). He concluded his argument in 3:19 by saying that "the whole world may be held accountable to God."

In the OT one of the ways that God's wrath could be avoided was through the sacrificial system. When the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, God was going to consume them on the spot. Aaron avoided God's judgment of the people by offering incense (Num. 16:41-50). "If it be objected that there is no great monetary value in the offering of a small quantity of incense, so that the atonement attained is out of all proportion to the price paid, the answer must be that the atonement obtained is always out of proportion to the price paid. . . There is always an element of grace in atonement" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 167). Atonement in the OT was not the soothing of God's anger, but was God's instituted means of receiving His grace. "It was the expression of God's anger on the one hand and the expression and putting in action of God's grace on the other hand. . . The sacrifices were in themselves prime acts of obedience to God's means of grace and His expressed will" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 178).

Paul now describes how the wrath of God can be averted in Christ. Men can avoid God's wrath because the death of Jesus was accepted by God as a propitiation. Propitiation means to turn the wrath of God away by means of an offering. It is "the acceptance by the wronged party of a compensatory payment, by which his anger against the one who has injured him is soothed" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 146). When the wrath of God for our sins was poured out upon Christ at the cross it was averted from us (see Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 184-202 for a detailed discussion).

One may ask, "If the wrath of God could be averted in the OT by something as simple as offering incense, or by some other means why was the death of Christ necessary? Why not just continue doing what men had always done?"

In this passage Paul says that Jesus died on the cross "to demonstrate His [i.e. God's] righteousness." But why did God's righteousness need to be demonstrated? Didn't people know that He was righteous?

God demonstrated His righteousness "because in His forbearance He had passed over the sins that were previously committed." In other words, the sins in the OT were never taken away until the cross of Christ. God had set up a means to avert His wrath at that time (see above), but offering an animal sacrifice or paying money is not equal compensation for the life of the sinner. Even so God accepted those offerings as tokens of the full payment for sin yet to come. One could say that the OT saints were only on credit. The actual payment for their sin was the death of Christ. In that sense Paul can say that "God had passed over the sins that were previously committed." Though the payment for sin had not yet been paid, God did not pour out His wrath upon people. He passed over their sins. But the death of

Christ declares (demonstrates) God's righteousness for it shows that the actual payment for sin was made. This also explains why the death of Christ was necessary and superior to the OT system in averting wrath. The OT system was only a mere shadow of reality.

He did this so that "He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). Not only did the death of Christ vindicate God by showing His justice, it explains how a holy God can be just in justifying the one who has faith in Christ. "A judge is unjust when he allows a criminal to be pronounced righteous, and treated accordingly. On the other hand, he acts justly when he pronounces the offender guilty, and secures the infliction of the penalty which the law denounces. What the apostle means to say is, that there is no such disregard to the claims of justice in the justification of the sinner who believes in Christ. This is seen and acknowledged when it is known that he is justified neither on account of his own acts and character, nor by a mere sovereign dispensing with the demands of the law, but on the ground of a complete satisfaction rendered by the substitute, i.e. on the ground of the obedience and the death of Christ. The gratuitous nature of this justification is not at all affected by its proceeding on the ground of this perfect satisfaction. It is to the sinner, still the most undeserved of all favors, to which he not only has not the shadow of a personal claim, but the very reverse of which he has most richly merited. It is thus that justice and mercy are harmoniously united in the sinner's justification. Justice is no less justice, though mercy has her perfect work; and mercy is no less mercy though justice is completely satisfied" (Hodge, 98).

"The man who believes that Jesus is the propitiation . . . is not fictitiously regarded as right with God; he actually is right with God, and God treats him as such." (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 273).